

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tajikistan

MAY 12, 2021

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution states “religious associations shall be separate from the state” and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons younger than the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. The government continued to detain and prosecute Jehovah’s Witnesses for refusal to serve in the military. In some cases, there were allegations of physical abuse. Jehovah’s Witnesses have unsuccessfully sought registration since 2007, and some adherents have claimed harassment by authorities. In April, a Shohmansur district court in Dushanbe convicted independent journalist Daler Sharifov of “inciting religious hatred,” sentencing him to one year in prison. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at Hanafi Sunni mosques. Government officials continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in religious organizations identified by authorities as extremist and banned, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The government continued to imprison approximately 20 imams in Sughd Region for membership in banned “extremist organizations.” In March, Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmon said that law

enforcement officials had arrested 154 individuals suspected of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. In August, a Sughd Region court sentenced 20 alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood to between five and seven years of prison for their membership in a banned organization. Law enforcement agencies continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in or support of groups banned by the government, including groups that advocated for Islamic political goals and presented themselves as political opponents to the government, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Authorities continued a pattern of harassing men with beards, and government officials again issued statements discouraging women from wearing “nontraditional or alien” clothing, including hijabs. According to international NGOs, the CRA levied heavy fines on four Protestant churches between August 2019 and January 2020 for arranging translation of the Bible into Tajik without prior CRA approval, as required by law. The CRA denied the NGO report, stating that translation of religious literature does not fall under its purview. The government noted its intent to reschedule a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to assess the religious situation in the country and make suggestions to address concerns. The visit planned for 2020 did not take place due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Individuals outside government continued to state they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among members of different religious groups, remained a subject they avoided.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials encouraged the government on a frequent basis during in-person meetings, virtual gatherings, and calls to adhere to its commitments to respect religious freedom. Embassy officers raised concerns regarding the participation of women and minors in religious services, restrictions on the religious education of youth, the situation facing Jehovah Witnesses in the country, and harassment of those wearing religious attire.

In 2016, the country was designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, 2020, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the required sanctions that accompany designation in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to local academics, the country is more than 90 percent Muslim, of whom the majority adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, the majority of whom reside in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, located in the eastern part of the country.

The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox. There are small communities of evangelical Christians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Lutherans, and nondenominational Protestants. There also are smaller communities of Jews, Baha’is, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution declares the country a secular state and “religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs.” According to the constitution, everyone has the right individually or jointly with others to profess any religion or no religion and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies. Since October 2007, the government

has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses for carrying out religious activities contrary to the country's laws, such as refusing obligatory military service.

The establishment and activities of religious associations promoting racism, nationalism, enmity, social and religious hatred, or calling for the violent overthrow of constitutional order or organizing of armed groups is prohibited. The constitution prohibits "propaganda and agitation" that encourages religious enmity. In accordance with provisions of the constitution, no ideology of a political party, public or religious association, movement, or group may be recognized as a state ideology.

The law prohibits provoking religiously based hatred, enmity, or conflict as well as humiliating and harming the religious sentiments of other citizens.

The law defines extremism as the activities of individuals and organizations aimed at destabilization, subverting the constitutional order, or seizing power. This definition includes inciting religious hatred.

The law prohibits individuals from joining or participating in what it considers to be extremist organizations. The government maintains a list of "extremist organizations" that it alleges employ terrorist tactics in an effort to advance Islamic political goals, including the National Alliance of Tajikistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida, Muslim Brotherhood, Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Lashkar-e-Tayba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Salafi groups, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT).

The CRA is the government body primarily responsible for overseeing and implementing all provisions of the law pertaining to religion. The Center for Islamic Studies, under the Executive Office of the President, helps formulate the government's policy toward religion.

The law defines a religious association as any group composed of persons who join for religious purposes. A religious association is a voluntary association of followers of one faith, with the purpose of holding joint worship and celebration of religious ceremonies, religious education, as well as spreading religious beliefs. To register a religious association, a group of at least 10 persons older than the age of 18 must obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming the adherents of their religious faith have lived in a local area for five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the citizenship of its founders, along with their home addresses and dates of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. A religious association must provide information on its houses of worship, which includes religious centers, central prayer houses, and religious educational institutions. The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, and once registered as a religious association, must report annually on its activities or face deregistration.

The government subdivides associations formed for “conducting joint religious worship” into religious organizations and religious communities, which also are defined by law. To operate legally, both are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA.

A religious organization provides for religious education and the spreading of religious faith. Types of religious organizations include the Republican Religious Center, central Friday mosques, central prayer houses, religious education entities, churches, and synagogues. Religious organizations are legal entities and function on the basis of charters. They may be district, municipal, or national organizations.

A religious community, unlike a religious organization, is not a legal entity. Its members gather to conduct other religious activities, which are not defined by law. For example, individuals gather for joint prayer, attend funeral prayers, and celebrate religious holidays. Types of religious communities include Friday mosques, five-time prayer mosques, prayer houses, and other places of worship. A religious community functions on the basis of a

charter after registering with the CRA, and the nature and scope of its activities are determined by the charter. A religious community must adhere to the “essence and limits of activity” set out in its charter.

The law provides penalties for religious associations that engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charters, and it assigns the CRA responsibility for issuing fines for such activities. The law imposes fines for carrying out religious activities without state registration or reregistration; violating provisions on organizing and conducting religious activities; providing religious education without permission; performing prayers, religious rites, and ceremonies in undesignated places; and performing activities beyond the purposes and objectives defined by the charter of the religious association. For first-time offenses, the government fines individuals 406 to 580 somoni (\$36-\$51), heads of religious associations 1,160 to 1,740 somoni (\$100-\$150), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 5,800 to 11,600 somoni (\$510-\$1,000). For repeat offenses within one year of applying first fines, penalties are increased to 696 to 1,160 somoni (\$61-\$100) for individuals, 2,320 to 2,900 somoni (\$200-\$260) for heads of religious associations, and 17,400 to 23,200 somoni (\$1,500-\$2,000) for registered religious associations. If a religious association conducts activities without registering, local authorities may impose additional fines or close a place of worship.

The law allows restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion deemed necessary by the government to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public order, protection of the foundations of constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country. In addition, religious organizations annually must report general information about worship, organizational, educational, and outreach activities to the state, and the state must approve the appointments of all imams.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience (the Law) stipulates that no party, public or religious association, movement, or group may be recognized as representing state ideology. The Law also asserts that the state maintains control over religious education to prevent illegal

training, propaganda, and the dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and hostility.

The Law broadly empowers the CRA to create regulations to implement state policies on religion, such as establishing specific guidelines for the performance of religious ceremonies. In addition to approving the registration of religious associations, organizations, and communities, the CRA maintains a broad mandate that includes approving the construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature.

The CRA oversees activities of religious associations, such as the performance of religious rites, and the development and adoption of legal acts aimed at the implementation of a state policy on the freedom of conscience and religious associations. Religious associations must submit information on sources of income, property lists, expenditures, numbers of employees, wages and taxes paid, and other information upon request by the CRA.

The Freedom of Conscience Law recognizes the special status of Sunni Islam's Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country's culture and spiritual life. This status is aspirational, however, and does not have any specific legal bearing.

The Freedom of Conscience Law restricts Islamic prayer to four locations: mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines. It regulates the registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques that may be registered within a given population area. The government allows "Friday mosques," which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, to be located in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; it allows "five-time mosques," which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, in areas with populations of 100 to 1,000. In Dushanbe, authorities allow Friday mosques in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time mosques in areas with populations of 1,000 to 5,000. The Law allows one "central Friday mosque" per district or city and makes other mosques subordinate to it.

Mosques function according to their charters in buildings constructed by government-approved religious organizations or by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The Law states the selection of chief-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders at a central Friday mosque), imam-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in a Friday mosque, who deliver a sermon at Friday noon prayers), and imams (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in five-time mosques) shall take place in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs.” The CRA must approve imam-khatibs and imams elected by the founders of each mosque. Local authorities decide on land allocation for the construction of mosques in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs.” The CRA disseminates recommended talking points for Friday sermons drafted by the Islamic Center. Individual imam-khatibs can modify or supplement the talking points, and, according to the CRA, there is no penalty for noncompliance.

The Law on Regulation of Traditions and Celebrations regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and observations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, including limiting the number of guests, and it controls ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals. The statute also states that mass worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies must be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions. This statute also bans the traditional sacrifice of animals at ceremonies marking the seventh and 40th day after a death. Traditional sacrifices are permissible during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha.

According to the Law on Regulation of Traditions and Celebrations, “Individuals and legal entities are obliged to protect the values of the national culture, including the state language and national dress.” According to customary (not official) interpretation, “national dress” does not include the hijab, although it does include a traditional Tajik form of covering a woman’s head, known as *ruymol*. The Code of Administrative violations (the Code) does not list the wearing of a beard, hijab, or other religious clothing as violations.

The Law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, and distribute religious literature and materials containing religious content after receiving CRA approval. Only registered religious associations and organizations are entitled to establish enterprises that produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The Code allows government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without CRA permission. According to the Code, violators are subject to confiscation of the given literature, as well as fines of 1,740 to 4,060 somoni (\$150-\$360) for individuals; 2,900 to 8,700 somoni (\$260-\$770) for government officials; and 5,800 to 17,400 somoni (\$510-\$1,500) for legal entities, a category that includes all organizations. According to the Code, producing literature or material containing religious content without identifying the name of the religious organization producing it entails fines of 2,900 to 5,800 somoni (\$260-\$510) and confiscation of the material.

The Law on Parental Responsibility for Education and Upbringing of Children prohibits individuals younger than the age of 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Individuals younger than 18 may attend religious funerals and practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The statute allows individuals younger than 18 to participate in religious activities that are part of specific educational programs in authorized religious institutions.

The Law requires all institutions or groups wishing to provide religious instruction to meet the Ministry of Education and Science’s statutory requirements. In practice, however, such permission is usually not granted because madrassahs are not able to meet the ministry’s requirements relative to classrooms, qualified teachers, and curriculum. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates. Other mosques, if registered with the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students in accordance with their charter and if licensed by the government.

With written parental consent, the Law allows minors between the ages of seven and 18 to obtain religious instruction provided by a registered religious organization outside

mandatory school hours. According to the Law, this may not duplicate religious instruction that is already part of a school curriculum. As part of the high school curriculum, students must take general classes on the “history of religions.” The CRA is responsible for monitoring mosques throughout the country to ensure implementation of these provisions.

According to the CRA, parents may teach religion to their children at home provided they express a desire to learn. The Law forbids religious instruction at home to individuals outside the immediate family. The Law also restricts sending citizens abroad for religious education and establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a degree in religious studies domestically and receive written consent from the CRA. The Code stipulates fines of 2,900 to 5,800 somoni (\$260-\$510) for violating these restrictions.

The Law on General Military Duty and Service requires men to serve one year in the armed forces if they have a university degree and two years if they have not graduated from a university. This same statute allows for alternative service, although the government has yet to adopt implementing regulations that specify acceptable forms of alternative service.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In January, authorities charged independent journalist Daler Sharifov with “inciting racial and religious hatred.” According to international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, police raided his apartment in January and confiscated religious books and materials and his computer. In February, the Prosecutor General’s Office said that Sharifov had published more than 200 articles and notes containing extremist content aimed at inciting religious intolerance. According to government religious experts, Sharifov published a treatise extolling the Muslim Brotherhood movement and jihadist ideology. In April, a Shohmansur district court sentenced Sharifov to a one-year prison term.

In November, Forum 18 reported that authorities arrested Rustamjon Norov, a 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness, in the northern city of Khujand for refusing military service on grounds of conscience. Prosecutors accused him of falsifying his medical history to evade military service, which he denied. Norov had offered to perform alternative civilian service. He filed an appeal, which was dismissed on October 28, according to Forum 18. At year's end, he was in pretrial detention in Khujand.

On April 2, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that a military court in Dushanbe sentenced Jehovah's Witness Jovidon Bobojonov to two years in a labor camp, beginning in January, for refusing compulsory military service, rejecting his offer of alternative service, according to Forum 18. On November 1, Bobojonov was freed by the 2020 nationwide amnesty decree signed by President Emomali Rahmon. In October 2019, enlistment officers had forcibly put Bobojonov on a train to an assigned military unit. According to Forum 18, Bobojonov was tortured while in the unit, transferred to prison in Dushanbe in January, and lost his appeal of his sentence in April. In 2019, government and military authorities denied that Bobojonov had the right to claim conscientious objection, stating that although the Law on General Military Duty and Service referred to the possibility of alternative service, there was no alternative in practice because the government had not defined acceptable forms of alternative service. The authorities said Bobojonov's refusal to serve therefore was a crime and that the actions of enlistment officers were lawful. The Dushanbe's military prosecutor's office stated that Bobojonov was given the option to serve in construction battalion that did not carry arms but refused.

Another Jehovah's Witness, Shamil Khakimov, remained in prison at year's end, serving five-and-a-half years for "inciting religious hatred," with his release scheduled for May 2024, according to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives. The Sughd Regional Court dismissed his appeal on October 26. Khakimov also received a three-year ban on proselytizing once he is released from prison.

In July, Forum 18 reported a climate of impunity for security officials accused of torture in the country, citing lack of official action on allegations of torture from Nilufar Rajabova, Bobojonov, and other prisoners detained or arrested in connection to their religious beliefs.

Authorities continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in or supporting banned extremist organizations. International NGOs continued to state that some of these organizations were considered to be potential political opponents of the government but in fact had never advocated for or participated in acts of violence. Local and international human rights organizations continued to say that the government “intimidates and arrests” opposition figures on the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism.

In January, Forum 18 reported that Khayriddin Dostakov had been arrested at Dushanbe Airport upon his return from visiting relatives in Russia. According to Forum 18, police questioned him about whether he had become a Shia Muslim or spread Shia beliefs and beat him and used electric shocks on him in prison. On August 25, authorities dropped all criminal charges and released Dostakov from custody after an eight-month detention.

On January 20, Radio Ozodi, the Tajik-language outlet of RFE/RL, reported that law enforcement officials had arrested approximately 70 alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization banned in the country since 2006. On March 20, according to RFE/RL, Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmon said that law enforcement officials had identified 314 individuals and arrested 154 of them, including the 70 mentioned in January, for their suspected ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to a June 8 RFE/RL report, Imam-Khatib Muhammadsayid Akramov and three of his brothers were convicted by the Khatlon regional court of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood. They reportedly were in custody for approximately four months prior to the trial, at which point their sentences were suspended and they were released.

On July 7, the Supreme Court began considering criminal cases against 116 alleged Muslim Brotherhood members, including 114 Tajik citizens and two Egyptian citizens. The defendants were charged with financing terrorist activities, making extremist statements, and organizing extremist activities. At year's end, the Supreme Court continued prosecuting these cases.

The government continued to imprison approximately 20 imams in Sughd Region, most of whom had received religious education abroad, for membership in banned extremist organizations.

In January, RFE/RL reported that a district court in Dushanbe sentenced Sadriddin Mulloyev, a member of Jamaat Tabligh, a Salafist movement banned by the government, to 12 years in prison for terrorism and extremism activities. Authorities had arrested Mulloyev in September 2019 after he returned to the country in response to a government amnesty program, according to Forum 18. Forum 18 said in January that Mulloyev had served an earlier prison term, from 2008 to 2013, for being a member of the same movement.

On November 12, according to his relatives, State Committee for National Security (GKNB) officers detained Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov, widely considered to be the leader of the Salafi movement in the country. Although law enforcement agencies did not comment on Abdurahmonov's arrest, RFE/RL cited an anonymous judiciary source in reporting that a Dushanbe court authorized his detention. Abdurahmonov's relatives told RFE/RL that authorities confiscated the cleric's computer and religious texts at the time of his arrest. He was previously arrested in 2009 on charges of inciting religious hatred but released from prison in 2013 following an amnesty. He remained in detention at year's end.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council that prohibited women from praying at mosques. Ismaili Shia women were permitted to attend Shia services in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region and Dushanbe.

The CRA stated that it did not receive any new applications for registration from non-Islamic religious associations during the year. The CRA reported that there remained 66 registered non-Islamic religious organizations, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Baha'i Faith.

In its October census, the government included a question on religious identity for the first time since 1937. According to Forum 18, some religious groups expressed fear that census answers could be used to target individuals and organizations because of their faith. Government officials were unclear on why the question was included, according to Forum 18. The Statistics Agency, responsible for conducting the census, stated the data was solely to collect demographic information and that it would publish the results in 2022.

NGOs reported continued government restrictions on imam-khatibs and imams, such as centrally selecting and approving sermon topics, as well as prohibiting some imam-khatibs from performing certain ceremonies.

In a 2019 submission to the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), which international observers stated remained factual, HRW stated the government "severely curtails freedom of religion or belief, proscribing certain forms of dress, including the hijab for women and long beards for men." While there remained no legal prohibition against wearing a hijab or a beard, NGOs reported authorities continued to discourage "nontraditional or alien" clothing. In a 2019 submission to the UN, the NGOs Human Rights Vision Foundation, Eurasian Dialogue Institution, and the Tajik Freethinkers Forum said official media stigmatized and persecuted religious women and that local police and ruling party activists organized surprise public inspections of women wearing hijabs, requiring them to remove the headwear. The NGOs also said female patients wearing hijabs were refused treatment in public health clinics and faced restricted access or were denied entrance to educational establishments and administrative buildings. Local women were permitted to cover their hair in a *ruymol*, in which the scarf covers a woman's hair and is tied in the back.

On January 22, RFE/RL reported that a court in Dushanbe denied Nilufar Rajabova's appeal after she was fined 550 somoni (\$49) for insulting a law enforcement official. According to December 2019 press reports, she accused Dushanbe police of insulting her and threatening her after she was detained, along with two dozen others, in a raid targeting women wearing hijabs. She told Forum 18 that she had also been hit by an officer, falling and injuring her spine as a result.

On February 13, Hilolbi Qurbonzoda, the chairwoman of the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, said during a press conference that the issue of women wearing hijabs would not be sensitive if it were not for terrorist attacks involving women wearing hijabs in other countries. Qurbonzoda added that the international community was taking steps to protect state interests and some countries had already adopted rules on women wearing hijabs. Qurbonzoda said it is important for Tajik women to keep their identity and not be confused with Arab women.

In August, RFE/RL reported that Vanj District officials said a group of individuals protested against being forced to shave, since officials in that area regarded beards as a foreign intrusion on local culture or a sign of religious extremism. Vanj District chairman Jabbor Qosim told RFE/RL that he would hold discussions with these individuals to look into their complaints.

The government mandated that anyone wishing to study religion abroad should receive government approval and should study at a government-approved religious institution.

In July, CRA chairman Davlatzoda said 3,901 citizens who had been illegally studying abroad at religious educational institutions had returned home over the previous 11 years. Some of these individuals reportedly returned involuntarily. The government sometimes sent these students to government boarding schools for secular reeducation. For example, on September 16, a member of the banned IRPT told RFE/RL that his 15-year-old son was "being held hostage" at a boarding school for children who misbehave. Mahmazarif Saidov, who lives in exile in Europe, said that his son had been studying at a Bangladeshi

madrassah when he was detained in Dubai and returned to the country in 2019. He said authorities had placed him in a special boarding school and prohibited contact with relatives. A district government source told RFE/RL on September 16 that Saidov's son had been "brainwashed" at the madrassah for nearly four years and needed time to receive a secular education.

In its 2019 review (the most recent) of the government's adherence to its commitments under the ICCPR, which international observers stated remained accurate, the UNHRC stated that it remained concerned "that interference by the State in religious affairs, worship, and freedom of religion and the ensuing restrictions... are incompatible with the Covenant." The UNHRC identified these restrictions as including: (a) interference with the appointment of imams and the content of their sermons; (b) control over books and other religious materials; (c) the requirement of state permission for receiving religious education abroad; (d) the prohibition against entering a mosque for those younger than 18 years of age; (e) the regulations regarding the registration of religious organizations; (f) the regulations on wearing clothes during traditional or religious celebrations and the prohibition of certain attire in practice, such as the hijab; and (g) restrictions imposed on Christian religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

A planned visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to assess the government's actions as they pertain to religious practice did not occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At year's end, the government was coordinating with the special rapporteur to reschedule the visit once conditions permitted.

According to Forum 18 in March and Voice of the Martyrs in May, between August 2019 and January 2020, the CRA fined four Protestant churches 7,000 to 11,000 somoni (\$620-\$970) each for arranging translation of the Bible into Tajik. One congregant told Forum 18 that these fines were "huge," given that the average monthly collection in some churches was only 500 somoni (\$44). The CRA denied the NGO report, stating that translation of religious literature does not fall under its purview.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals outside government continued to state they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among members of various religious groups, remained a subject they avoided. Individuals said they were more comfortable discussing abuses of civil rights than discussing sectarian disagreements or restrictions on religious freedom.

The NGO Open Doors *2021 World Watch List* report, which covers events in 2020, stated that because the country's ethnic identity is directly tied to Islam, Christians who have converted from Islam face criticism by family, friends, and community.

Leaders of some minority religious groups continued to state their communities enjoyed positive relationships with the majority Hanafi Sunni population, who, they said, did not hinder their worship services or cause concern for their congregations. Other minority religious group leaders stated that converts from Islam experienced social disapproval from friends and neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In separate meetings throughout the year with the Foreign Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister, CRA senior representatives, and other government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to raise concerns regarding restrictions on minors and women participating in religious services, the situation of Jehovah Witnesses in the country, and restrictions on the religious education of youth. Embassy officers also raised the issue of harassment of women and men for religious dress and grooming.

Because of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the embassy did not host any in-person public events dealing with freedom of religion issues. Embassy officials had limited engagements in virtual formats with civil society, NGOs, and religious leaders from Christian organizations on the issue of religious freedom.

U.S. officials emphasized with government representatives the importance of steps to ameliorate restrictions on freedom of religion through national legislation and with regards to alternative service. U.S. embassy officers sought amnesty for conscientious objectors and prisoners of conscience. Embassy officials also discussed with religious leaders how they conducted services during the pandemic amid closures of religious associations, such as mosques and churches throughout the country, in an effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions as required in the important national interest of the United States.